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JESUS OUR MASTER AND LORD.—A TRACT FOR THE TIMES.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

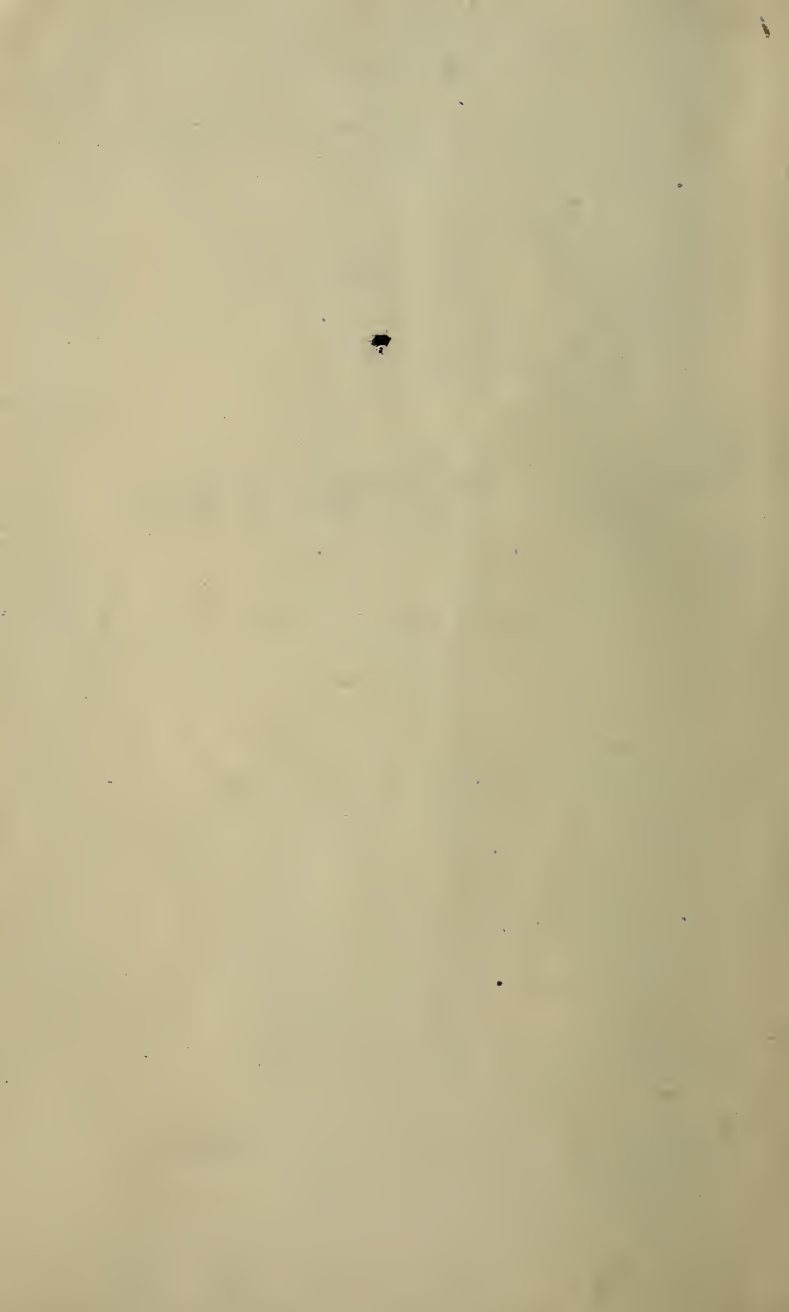
ORDINATION OF MR. HENRY F. JENKS,

At Fitchburg, Mass., April 10, 1867.

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S E R M O N.

JOHN xiii. 13. — “Ye call me Master and Lord, and ye say well;
for so I am.”

DID the apostles say well? And is it well for us to say so? It is the most important question that we can ask and answer in connection with the services of this hour; for on our answer to it depends our entire theory of the Christian ministry; nay more, on the answer which the Church shall give to it, depends the permanence of the Church, and of the institutions now called Christian.

Have we, then, a Master and a Lord? or is it with us as with the Hebrews when there was no king in Israel, and every man did what seemed right in his own eyes?

In answering this question, I would first say, we need a Master and a Lord. It is admitted that Christendom has not hitherto fared the worse for its alleged bondage; but our age, we are told, has outgrown it, and is wise enough to solve for itself all problems appertaining to God, duty, the soul, eternity. In what, then, consist the boasted achievements of our age? They are almost all material, and cannot help us in the investigation of moral and spiritual truth. The railway and the steamship may make our antipodes our neighbors; but they bring us no nearer to the stars, or to Him whose palace-floor they pave. The telegraph borrows the lightning's wings to carry messages be-

tween living men; but the speaking wires have not yet been stretched to the dwelling-place of departed spirits. The sun paints for us the images of things that we have seen; but it gives us no pictures from the realm of the unseen. These triumphs of art are simply Titanic,—the developement of earth-forces, and they make no approach toward the solution of spiritual problems.

Pass we to the science of organized and of inorganic nature: here there has been a vast progress in analysis, classification, and nomenclature; but those who, in these departments, have most enlarged the area of positive knowledge and fructifying thought, do not even profess to have opened new sources of spiritual truth. Bold attempts have, indeed, been made to cast discredit on the primeval record of man's divine sonship, and to prove him a not very far-off consin of the ape and the gorilla; and this is confessedly among the secrets of nature hidden from the mind of Jesus Christ: but the most that can be claimed is, that the so-much coveted relationship is barely possible; those who crave it supplying in that very craving a stronger evidence than any facts that can be adduced. Not a single plank on which one can tread with a firm foothold has been laid over the chasm which separates the human body, mind, and soul from the most advanced species of the brute creation.

Then, too, in the field of intellectual philosophy, there has been no progress. There is as little common and admitted ground between concurrent schools as when Plato and Aristotle held divided sway and rival sceptres.

What is man? Whence? Whither? What is death? What lies beyond death? What is our relation to the Supreme Being? What would He have us be and do? These are questions on which the science of the nineteenth century has no new deliverances. The most that it has done is to clear away the earth-mists that hung over this lower creation, and to shed

light where there was dense darkness, within the circumference of that sensible horizon which bounds our view on every side. To the borders of the vast horizon which embraces the universe of living souls no mortal eye has yet penetrated; and here we are no less dependent on revelation than were those to whom the nearest objects were unclassed, unanalyzed, unknown. All our science abuts upon invincible ignorance. In every branch of inquiry, the words that carry the most of the prestige of learning—such as gravitation, caloric, magnetism, electricity, force (of which, perhaps, all the rest are forms)—are but names for our utter ignorance, not for our knowledge. True science recognizes its own narrow confines, and treads them with veiled face and unshodden feet, before Him whom man, by his searching, cannot find out, and whom we know only as Jesus has revealed Him.

But you may ask, Are there not peculiarly portentous signs in our heavens? Is there not an impatience of authority, a spurning of the idea of Christ's lordship and mastership, a craving for a new evangel, for something higher and better than Christianity, which distinguishes our age from all that have preceded it? I answer, unhesitatingly, No. Among the greatest and wisest men, there was never a larger proportion of humbly and confidingly Christian men than now. Nor do I find that the pre-eminently good men and women of our time have one whit less reverence for Christ, and faith in him, than those of earlier generations. Those who have had the largest growth in Christ have not outgrown him. When you meet a person of a thoroughly saintly spirit, one from whose every word and look virtue goes forth, and in whose presence it is a blessing to linger, you never think of inquiring whether that person has got beyond Christianity, and refuses to call Jesus Master and Lord. You would be as much surprised to hear such a confession from him as you would to hear him pour out a torrent of coarse ribaldry and blasphemy. You know perfectly well

that the higher planes of devotion, and of spiritual excellence, are still occupied, as they have been for eighteen centuries, by disciples of Jesus the Master, by subjects of Jesus the Lord.

But the cry, "We will not have this man to reign over us," has been heard from the very first; and those who have raised it have always claimed to be the progressive men of their times, in advance of Christian believers, — have always assumed a supercilious attitude toward those who maintained allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth. Nor is it a new thing for men of this class to exercise priestly functions in the Christian Church. Hume had, among those who shared his scepticism, a few, at least, of the Scotch clergy, who, in their formal adherence to the rigidly Calvinistic creed of their church, certainly evinced as large an advance beyond Christian morality, as they professed to have made beyond Christian faith. In Germany, it is well known that unbelievers, pantheists, and atheists have, in large numbers and for a long time, borne office in the Lutheran church, — men whose honesty and piety equally challenge our admiration, when we consider that without professed assent to the Lutheran confession of faith they could not have been inducted into office.

Nor is the disavowal of the mastership and lordship of Christ a new or an increasing phenomenon in our own country. It was probably much more common among men of position and character sixty or seventy ago than it is now. We used to have infidel assemblies, newspapers, bookstores, which have ceased to be, or to attract attention, simply because the so-called Christian pulpit and press now give free currency to sentiments which, in earlier times, were compelled to seek utterance outside of the nominal Church. Formerly, the man who believed that the whole of our Saviour's public ministry was a mistake, a failure, and a sin; that he yielded to an ambition unworthy of him, when he talked of his kingdom, and used terms that

implied a claim to leadership and authority; that he expiated his presumption by his death, and bitterly repented of it too late in Gethsemane, — it should be added, to recant that repentance the very next morning, when he said, "Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven," — formerly, I say, one who thus believed would have honestly taken his position as an avowed enemy of Christianity, instead of arrogating for this tissue of absurdity and blasphemy the pre-eminent title of Christianity, and stigmatizing the belief of the whole Christian world as pseudo-Christianity. What is peculiar to our time and community is, first, that infidelity has become so illogical as to call itself by the very name it blasphemes; and, secondly, that a liberality more weak than tolerant, more foolish than kind, insists on giving so broad a sense to Christianity as to leave to it no distinctive meaning whatever. If Thomas Paine were now alive and among us, he would style himself a Christian teacher, would have his name inserted — I trust without a parochial charge — in our "Year Book," would take his seat in our Convention as a delegate from Florence, or some other mythical church, and would complain of your bigotry if you would not let him preach in your pulpit, and welcome him as a contributor to your religious journals.

Now, I maintain that our age feels the need of a Master and Lord as intensely as it was ever felt; the only difference being that the few who repudiate this need refuse to assume an antagonistic name, corresponding to their antagonistic attitude.

I have spoken of the intellectual need of a Master and Lord. Our emotional nature feels the same need. Our hearts yearn for one whose voice they may hear with reverence and obey with confidence. This need is supplied for us in infancy and childhood by the parents who are, to our inexperience, light and strength. But we may exhaust and transcend their wisdom; in our adult years, we may, without vanity, feel that they are no longer our infallible guides. Yet the child-heart

dies not, and ought not to die, within us; for, when father and mother forsake us, the Lord takes us up. Jesus, if we believe in him, comes into their place, stands as they stood between God and us, sustains in us the sweet and genial emotions of reverence and trust, preserves within us all that is most lovely in childhood, and keeps the heart still young when the head grows hoary.

In our frail and feeble being, imbosomed in the infinite and the eternal, walking among the graves of our kindred and coevals, and perhaps on the brink of our own, can any thing be more unfitting than the arrogance and presumption that scout the very possibility of a keener insight than ours in the realm of the unseen, of a surer guidance in the realm of the unknown? Can aught be more becoming than the humility and modesty which are at once the root, the blossom, and the fruitage of faith? And, let me ask, is there any so elevated type of human character, any which so much commands our admiration, and which we would so rejoice to have our own, as that profound faith, which having, in a pure, dutiful, and useful life, obeyed and followed a Lord and Master it has deemed divine, hears his voice amidst the thunder-tones of dissolving nature, sees his footprints in living light through the valley of the death-shadow, and can say, without doubt or misgiving, "I know that my Redeemer liveth; and, because he lives, I shall live also?"

But it is said, by those who deny the authority and lordship of Jesus, The fundamental truths of Christianity are self-evident. They reveal themselves to consciousness; they are verified by experience; they are written on the heart of man. We believe them, not because they were uttered eighteen hundred years ago, but because they have the spontaneous and irrepresible testimony of our own souls. I reply, You are conscious of the circulation of the blood; you feel it as you lay your fingers on your wrist, your hand on your heart; but, before Harvey announced this circulation, it was no less real, yet it was not an object of

consciousness to the most acute physiologist. It is one thing to discover, quite another to recognize and verify, the facts of consciousness. If the truths of Christianity are intuitive and self-evident, how is it that they formed no part of any man's consciousness till the advent of Christ? How is it that they are not springing up to-day in the consciousness of astute and speculative men in China and in India? How is it that the only regions in which this consciousness is attained are those in which the words of Jesus are familiarly known, and that the very men who have this independent consciousness of their truth have, without an exception, been trained in conversance with the evangelic record?

But it is said, The human mind reaches not its full development in any one individual or age. Each generation is heir of the attainments, the discovered truths, of all preceding generations. The discoveries of one age are the axioms of the next. The child begins where the father left off. Christianity marks the highest religious development of its own age, the ripened product of the religious wisdom of preceding ages. Jesus was the representative religious genius of his time, yet only its natural growth; and, as he exceeded all that went before him, so there will come after him those greater than he. I reply by asking, Where was the heritage to which he succeeded? Was it in his own nation? — in the pitiful drivellings of the rabbis, of which we have full record? Or was it in the more cultivated nations of classic fame? Many of you are familiar with the Greek and Latin authors before, at, and after the Christian era. Do you find in them the remotest approach to Christianity, — the faintest tokens of a religious development which culminated in the gospel? Virgil, Ovid, and Horace flourished in the generation immediately preceding the promulgation of Christianity. Do they indicate a high stage of religious progress? If Christ and those who wrote concerning him be left out of the question, is there so much as a fragment of the literature of his age that implies an advanced maturity of wisdom as to the

truths appertaining to man's nature, duty, and destiny? Are not the thoughtful writers of the age groping in darkness, though longing for light, while the greater part of those whose works have come down to us betray a moral culture beneath that of the lowest dregs of Christian society? A little before the Christian era, the *pontifex maximus* proposed in the Roman senate that the traitors convicted of participation in Catiline's conspiracy should not be put to death, but should be subjected to imprisonment, chains, and privation as long as they lived; because death, being the end of life, was, of course, the end of suffering. He accompanied the proposal with a sneer at the old fables about Tartarus, and the sentiment was received without rebuke or dissent. Does this denial of immortality by the most august and enlightened assembly upon earth indicate a hopeful stage of human progress toward the clear and confident enunciation of that truth so shortly afterward from the lips of Jesus?

Moreover, if Christ's wisdom only marked a stage in the natural development of human thought, how is it that the greater than Christ is yet to come? Why is it that hitherto the wisest and best have been his followers, and that those who have most outgrown their fellows have still ascribed to him all that they have and are? Is there not a very strong prestige in behalf of one whose wisdom and purity thus set him apart from, and raised him above, the men of his own and succeeding ages? Especially if he, the most lowly and modest of beings, yet asserts his own pre-eminent right to reverence and confidence; if, while performing the most menial of offices, as he moves from disciple to disciple with the basin and towel, he yet tells them that they say well when they call him Master and Lord,—is there not at least a probability that they said well?

But we want more than this. We want his credentials. We want positive proof of his specially divine commission, of his right to the eminence unrivalled and alone among the sons of men, on which he evi-

dently claims to stand. No one who regards the Gospels as literally or substantially true can call this right in question. If Jesus wrought the divine works which those books ascribe to him; if he received the visible and audible attestations from heaven which they record; if he actually rose from the dead, as they relate, — then no one can doubt that he was ordained and sent by God as our Master and Lord. How stands the proof?

It is currently said that the old treatises on the Christian evidences, Paley and the like, are superseded. This is true in two different senses. On the one hand, they are superseded in reasoning with those who maintain that revelation and miracle, and, therefore, historical Christianity, are intrinsically impossible; for no amount of evidence can prove an impossibility. They are superseded, on the other hand, by more ample testimony, more affluent evidence, more profound historical criticism, — the results of a riper Christian scholarship, — all pointing in the same direction, and leading to the same conclusion. Applying to the four Gospels the tests which we apply to other ancient writings, I am prepared to maintain that we have stronger reason for believing that they were written by the men whose names they bear, than we have for believing that Cicero wrote the *De Officiis*, or Virgil the *Æneid*. Stronger reasons, I say; for we have for the authorship of the Gospels, not only the testimony of individuals, but that of representative men, who were the voice of extended Christian communities, and to whose testimony there is no opposing voice; and we have this testimony in behalf, not of books whose reception was a matter of indifference, but of books which were received at the hazard and forfeiture of fortune, honor, and life, so that there was, from the first, every possible temptation to discredit them if they could be discredited. This is the conclusion, not of a blind and prejudging faith, but of the most diligent and sceptical research; and it is maintained by none with stronger assurance than by those most intimately conversant with the monuments

of Christian antiquity, and with the entire range of collateral history and literature. As for the leading facts in the life of Jesus, recorded in these books, the external proof of their authenticity is stronger than we have for the universally admitted facts of profane history of the same age; for, in addition to the mass of testimony in confirmation of those facts, we have, first, the existence and growth of the Christian Church, for which it is impossible to account rationally if they were false; secondly, the observance, from primitive times, of Christian anniversaries, ordinances, and commemorative institutions, which are the collective testimony of the earliest Christian communities to the facts commemorated, inasmuch as no such observance can begin without an adequate reason; and, thirdly, the occurrence, within the period when those facts could have been tested, and among their professed eye-witnesses, of numerous martyrdoms, which, at that period, were literally *martyrdoms*, that is, *testimonies*, borne at a cost which demonstrates the unquestioning belief of the witnesses.

What are the grounds on which this mass of proof is set aside? First, it is alleged that miracles and special revelation are impossible. Then, because the facts recorded in the Gospels cannot be discredited without discrediting the books themselves, it is assumed — not proved — that these books cannot have been written by disciples and coevals of Jesus, who would have known the falsity of their contents; and violent and unnatural hypotheses concerning their composition are started, without any pretence of historical testimony, or exhibition of internal evidence in their favor. It is said that the Gospels were not made, but grew. They had no authors, but took their present homogeneous shape by successive accretions from many anonymous and unauthoritative pens in successive generations. It is not pretended that any other books ever grew in this way, — that their composition was in accordance with any known laws or habits of literary composition, or with the normal action of mind in authorship. On

this theory, the Gospels, especially when we consider the homogeneous form in which they have severally come down to us, are as truly miracles as any of the events which they record; and their existence can be accounted for only by some preternatural action on the minds of their legion of writers. No sensible man would risk his reputation for sanity by maintaining such hypotheses with regard to any other than reputedly sacred books; and, with regard to these, it is the assumed impossibility of their contents that alone can justify the resort to expedients so desperate.

The one sole ground, then, for the denial of the claim of Jesus to be called Lord and Master is the alleged impossibility of his recorded history, of his specially divine mission, of his superhuman endowments and works. But this impossibility can be known only by an omniscient mind, — by one who stands on the same plane with the Creator; for can any finite mind know all that it was ever possible for God to do? Yet we could point to mere striplings, whose knowledge of the things immediately around them is but crass ignorance, who deem themselves much more intimately conversant with the divine mind than Jesus ever was, and are certainly much more profoundly convinced of the narrow limits of the divine power and wisdom than of any limits to their own intelligence and capacity.

The alleged facts of the gospel history are not only physically possible under the government of omnipotence, if omnipotence there be; but they differ merely in their manward, not in their Godward aspect, from the events daily witnessed. Sound philosophy finds no efficient causes in nature, and recognizes in all that takes place the omnipotent God as sole force and cause. Now if, to aid human prescience, God ordinarily telegraphs the near future by the signs which we call causes, He certainly may for higher purposes, affecting human well-being, have sometimes omitted these signs, in order that the ever-working arm of Omnipotence might be laid bare, and that events, not preceded by the accustomed signs, might be themselves signs of the

presence of a divine messenger or the utterance of a divine message.

There is, in these alleged miracles, no antecedent impossibility; for to the Infinite Being all alternatives must have been possible. General laws, so called, are laws, not imposed upon Him, but established by Him. They are not a necessity of His nature, but His preferred mode of administration,—a preference, which, if ordained for the benefit of His intelligent and spiritual offspring, we can readily imagine and believe to have been suspended whenever their greater benefit required such suspension.

About miracles, considered as mere historical facts, I care little. Nor do I regard them as antecedently necessary to prove the perfect wisdom and excellence of Jesus Christ. To my mind, they have a still higher worth, as revelations of the underlying and inworking Providence in ordinary events and in the whole of life. Yet, even in this regard, I would not make them an absolutely essential article of faith; though, for my own part, I should cling to them—if sustained, as they seem to me, by amply adequate proof—as the most significant and precious events in the world's history. But, in divesting the Gospels of their miraculous character, you so mar and lacerate the sacred form of the Redeemer, that his very crucifiers were merciful in the comparison. You make him either an impostor or a madman. You convert his sublimest utterances into insane and blasphemous rhodomontade. You take away my Lord, and I know not where you have laid him.

Let me, on the other hand, receive the simple narrative of the Gospels: I find in Jesus strength and beauty, wisdom and love, the pattern of perfect humanity, the unsullied image of the Supreme Father. I feel that he is most worthily my Master, most rightfully my Lord. In all things appertaining to the life that now is, there is no blessedness to be compared with that of obeying and following him: and, but for him, beyond the grave all is darkness and the shadow of death; for,

Lord, to whom else shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.

I said, at the outset, that the question whether Jesus is our Master and Lord is the most important question that can be asked and answered on the present occasion. If you answer it in the negative, you stultify our ordination service. We have strong confidence in the ability, sincerity, and devotedness of our young brother whom you have chosen as your religious teacher. But did he abjure his Master and Lord, and come to you in his own name, we could not ask you to receive him as your guide; we should rather bid him sit as a disciple at the feet of the fathers and mothers in your Israel. For how slender is his stock of experience compared with yours! How little knows he, in and from his own heart, of the solemn, sad, and dread emergencies in which he is to stand at your side as counsellor and comforter! How utterly inadequate is he, from aught that can have entered into his own young student-consciousness, to shed light upon the various life-paths of those who are immersed in the cares, conflicts, temptations, and trials of the busy world! And, were it not so,—if his intuitions are his sole test of truth and duty, why are his intuitions more worthy of reliance than your own? Has he a monopoly of the Spirit, conferred on him by the imposition of our hands? Or have you any right to pay deference to his less mature judgment in matters of high moral and spiritual concern? Have you any right to place him in a position in which he may bias your own independent convictions,—may use the purchase which the pulpit gives him, to draw you from your own several ways of thinking to his self-spun theories of truth and right? Oh, no! We would not invest him with so perilous a charge. We could not ask you to be so false to your own manhood as to repose in him so perilous a trust.

But far different is the case when we ordain him as a minister of Jesus Christ. In giving himself to the study of the divine word; in opening his mind to the

wisdom, his heart to the love of God in Christ; in preaching not himself, but the Lord Jesus, — his youth shall have the ripeness of age, his slender experience the maturity of a finished course. For it will be the Ancient of Days that will speak to you by his voice, the All-wise that will counsel and guide you in his teachings. He may know little of your several life-paths; but he can apply to them the unchanging, everlasting law of right as uttered in the words and incarnate in the life of Jesus. He may be a stranger to the trials and sorrows that will gather over your homes and hearts; but he can carry to them the consolations that flowed from the Saviour's lips and dwelt in his soul, and can breathe into them the peace of the Son of God, — that peace which the world can neither give nor take away. He may not know in his own person the agony of bodily suffering, the weariness of wasting disease, the heart-throes of approaching dissolution; but he will have communed in tender, devout sympathy with his suffering, dying Lord; he will bring to your bedsides the lessons of resignation, piety, trust, overcoming faith, which he has learned in Gethsemane and on Calvary; and in them he shall be as an angel from heaven strengthening you. He may not have stood by the lifeless forms or the gravesides of those dear to him as his own soul; but he will have stood by the bier of Nain, by the tomb of Bethany, by the broken sepulchre of the Lord; and, full of the power of the resurrection, he can change your grief into solemn joy, make your sighs hosannas, your tears morning dewdrops of the day which has no night, as he talks to you of the eternal life made manifest in the flesh, and rehearses over the spoils and ruins of death those sublimest words ever heard on earth, which shall echo from grave to grave till the last of the dying shall have put on immortality, — "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live, and whoso liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

Receive our young brother, then, as a minister of

Christ. Hear, believe, trust him for the sake of his Master. Respect, honor, love him for the sake of his Lord. God grant that you and your children may long rejoice in his light. May souls led by him to Christ, and confirmed by him in the faith of their Master and the service of their Lord, be the manifold seal of his ministry on earth, and the thickly jewelled crown of his joy in heaven!

